

The hand in the dark that matters the most



BARB GUY

I am married. The thought comes to me in the charcoal black of my bedroom as I realize I'm awake. My thumb is curled around Chris's, our sleeping hands holding fast. Two inches from my eye, a gold glint. It's the wedding band he agreed to try and keep on for a week, never picturing himself a wedding ring guy.

If I stare at it, I can make it well up with goldness in the dark. When I'm crying, it flares blue like the neon flame that graced a downtown skyscraper when I was a kid.

I'm not newly married, just newly impressed with the power of it. Finding someone who "gets" you and exploiting that for enjoyment in every way possible is the beginning. Later, when 10 or 20 years have passed, when one of you is going through chemotherapy and everything is

terrifying, to have a hand to hold, to have Chris's hand to hold, there are no words.

Lately, sleep is unfamiliar, arriving and departing by a moment's caprice rather than the previous, more comfortable, patterns. After a morning shower, I lie down briefly and awaken three hours later. Then, at night, I can't stay asleep.

Normally my mind races during insomnia. Now it's all fuzz. I want to care that Karl Rove resigned. I want to care that soldiers are writing to *The New York Times* begging for their concerns to be heard.

Closer to home, I stare at the gold glint in the dark and I worry I don't have the grace or the strength to do what I must. I worry that cancer - no, chemotherapy - will make me into someone different. Already, a prodigious addiction to Diet Coke has been vanquished by an instant, cold-turkey revulsion. Water provides no relief, now tasting swampish. I'm told I'll probably gain weight during treatment, which seems an over-the-top cruelty.

A doctor matter-of-factly tells me, "This isn't weight loss; this is cancer." I'd like to make a joke about gaining weight at the same time I'm going completely bald but I can't make it funny right now.

Kindness is my salvation, kindness and laughter. Lovely people - strangers, acquaintances, friends - have given so much to me and to Chris already. I worry I owe more heartfelt thank-you notes than I will ever be able to write.

People who have had cancer - or who are fighting it now - have delved into their pain to present me with pieces of themselves, to give me strength. "Cancer is a gift . . ." "Cancer is a blessing . . ." The words ring shrill with blasphemy, but at the same time I suspect I'll speak them just as sincerely someday and I am grateful to the caring people teaching me these lessons. I vow to learn from this experience so I can care for others.

Know that I am with you. If I could point to the thing that has helped me the most so far, it would be that sentiment: *Know that I am with you.* So many people have spoken these words directly to me, or e-mailed them, or written them in a card. Still others put words aside and use their actions to leave no room for doubt.

Some people prove they are with you by mentioning you in their prayers. Some organize a complicated roster of people to bring you dinner from now until 2008. Others send flowers or take your dogs for a walk. Some send funny e-mails while others

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leave phone messages. All ways
are good.

But if you're very, very lucky,
someone, still boyish and sweet,
will unfailingly hold your hand in
the dark.

*BARB GUY is a regular contributor to
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